

Silver spoon lairds' fish farming attack is a huge own goal

Jenny Hjul Tuesday May 05 2020, 12.01am, The Times

Scotland's salmon farming industry has come under attack yet again from its regular detractors in the wild fish lobby. Normally, criticism from this quarter might be shrugged off by salmon farmers, who have long been the target of the angling community, which blames the decline in wild stocks on fish farms.

But both the grounds and the timing of the latest campaign leave a nasty taste. In a new report, the anti-salmon farm group Salmon and Trout Conservation Scotland and the Sustainable Inshore Fisheries Trust demand the government cuts support for the sector because its economic value and the number of people it employs have apparently been exaggerated.

This is quite a claim for a Scottish success story that is worth more than £1 billion a year to the economy, creates thousands of jobs and produces the UK's biggest food export. The report's authors base their logic on unchecked statistics (they even contradict their own figures) and the premise that the growth of salmon farming comes at the expense of others, including creel fishermen, recreational fishers and divers, and sea wildlife tourists.

Nowhere do they provide evidence that salmon farm sites — which if placed together would occupy the area of just two 18-hole golf courses on our vast coastline — cannot coexist happily with all other marine users. But it is not only the report's unfounded assumptions that are so objectionable.

Fish farmers have toiled throughout the coronavirus crisis to maintain a steady supply of salmon to the supermarkets. Their role is vital, as is that of the fish processors, boat crews, hauliers and sales and distribution teams. Undermining all their efforts are wealthy river owners, motivated by their determination to protect their riparian inheritance and too blinkered to see how shameful their defence of privilege looks at a time like this. Their grievances have for years played on environmental concerns but with wild salmon depleted in east coast rivers as well as in England, where there are no farms, they have had to change tack.

A report that pits hard-working food producers against silver spoon sports fishermen is a massive own goal, one that will be remembered the next time the angling lairds take aim from their estates.

Dear Sir

Jenny Hjul seems to have swallowed the salmon farming industry's PR line, that only 'silver spoon lairds' care about the impact of their fish farms, or about the dodgy economic figures that they and politicians have used to support a doubling of production to 300-400,000 tonnes of farmed salmon by 2030. Doing so will also double their pollution, pesticides, parasites and diseases, which directly impact jobs in coastal communities that depend on the health of the sea. The harm caused by doing this has not been assessed.

All the pollution from Scotland's 200 plus fish farms is dumped into the sea. People in our communities know that it spreads very far and is toxic to life on the seabed, including the crabs, lobsters and prawns our fishermen depend on. Fish farmers also shoot seals and illegally disturb porpoises and dolphins with deafeningly loud 'seal scarers', and their open-net cages release billions of parasitic sea lice, which are deadly to wild salmon and sea trout. Many of the thousands of people we represent work as fishermen, scallop divers, wildlife guides and in accommodating visitors to our coast. Few are anglers and none are lairds. Every job here matters, and they are threatened just as much by COVID-19 as jobs in fish farming.

Deciding whether to allow this industry to expand should be based on the facts, including a full accounting of the costs, and not just the claimed benefits. This largely foreign-owned industry exports its profits and does not pay to clean up its pollution or the impact of its sea lice. Official statistics show that only about 1200 people work directly on Scotland's fish farms. **The Economic Contribution of Open Cage Salmon Aquaculture to Scotland** report shows that inflated figures have been used to justify expansion, exaggerating new jobs by 251% and economic benefits by 124%.

Fishermen are now so concerned about the 'significant effect on fishing and marine life due to sewage and chemical pollution' affecting their livelihood that the Clyde Fishermen's Association is calling for 'an immediate moratorium on any new marine open cage fish farms and any expansion of existing fish farm sites' in the Firth of Clyde, 'as any expansion of the industry will be unsustainable and may result in irreversible damage caused to the environment'. The CFA has 200 members.

According to Fisheries Management Scotland, wild salmon and sea trout are now at crisis point, with populations at an all-time low. Sea lice from farms are not the only problem but they can have a huge impact: Scottish Natural Heritage agrees: 'we believe there is now significant scientific evidence to conclude that population level impacts are possible'. Marine Scotland adds: 'Salmon aquaculture can result in elevated numbers

of sea lice in open water and hence is likely to increase the infestation potential on wild salmonids. This in turn could have an adverse effect on populations of wild salmonids in some circumstances.'

Its website quotes research that found a 'reduction in the catches and counts of salmon on the west coast correlating with increased production of farmed salmon', and 'showed that rivers with farms had significantly lower abundances of juvenile salmon than those without farms'. It also quotes a study on the River Errif, in Ireland, that 'estimated that returns of salmon after one year at sea were 50% lower, in years following high sea lice levels on nearby salmon farms during smolt migration.' The authors considered that 'the reduction in returning salmon numbers due to sea lice could affect the viability of the salmon population in the long term.' Other Norwegian and Irish work also 'indicated that salmon lice can influence the population status of wild salmon'.

Last week an expert group convened by the Scottish Government, including the Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation, published its recommendations to Ministers on the impact of fish farming on wild fish. After years of prevarication, the SSPO has finally acknowledged 'the potential hazard that farmed salmonid aquaculture presents to wild salmonids', and that the 'finfish aquaculture regulatory regime should be reformed to ensure that it is fit for purpose ... (and) ... should protect wild migratory salmonids'. Perhaps the fish farmers didn't tell Jenny Hjul.

In 2018 a Scottish Parliamentary Inquiry said that 'urgent and meaningful action needs to be taken to address regulatory deficiencies as well as fish health and environmental issues before the industry can expand.'

Two years on the expansion is in full swing but little has been done to address the environmental issues.

Thoughtless caricatures like Hjul's help no-one except this dirty industry, which is clinging to its old-fashioned methods because they are cheaper. Fish farming must be cleaned up before allowing it to double in size.